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The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar

Birger A. Pearson,
University of California, Santa Barbara (Emeritus)

Preface

The essay published here is a slightly expanded version of an article published in *Religion* 25 (October, 1995), 317-338. That article represents results of a graduate seminar in New Testament that I conducted for the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, during the Fall semester of 1994. The seminar, "Examining *The Five Gospels*," was devoted to a critical analysis of the work of the now famous "Jesus Seminar," as published in its "red letter edition" of the four canonical gospels plus the *Gospel of Thomas*. My seminar was held on the campus of the Pacific School of Religion, where, nine years before, the Jesus Seminar had begun its work. It provided me with material for lectures on

historical Jesus scholarship in general, and the Jesus Seminar in particular, at Indiana University Bloomington in November 1994, and at UC Santa Barbara and UC Santa Cruz in May 1995.

Following upon my lecture at Santa Barbara I received a request from the American Editor of *Religion*, Ivan Strenski, a UC colleague, that I write up my findings in the form of an article that could be published in the journal. I agreed to this, and submitted the article to the journal during the summer of 1995; it was then scheduled for publication in the October issue. *Religion*, published in London, is an international journal devoted to the study of critical issues in religion and religions, ancient and modern, and theoretical approaches to such topics. It is read by religious studies generalists and specialists in diverse areas of the study of religion. Thus, I attempted to tailor my article to this wider audience, though I certainly hope that it will attract the attention of New Testament scholars as well. This latter possibility is enhanced by its republication in the **Occasional Papers** series of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity.

I want to express my thanks to Ivan Strenski, first for inviting me to contribute the article to *Religion*, and then for helping me to arrange with the publisher (Academic Press, London) for permission to republish it here. Christopher Morray-Jones, a colleague at UC Berkeley (where I also taught during the Fall semester of 1994), sat in on several sessions of my GTU seminar, and provided many useful insights in the seminar's discussions, for which I heartily thank him. He also read and responded to a pre-publication manuscript of my *Religion* article. Others who read the manuscript, and provided useful comments, were Gregory J. Riley and James M. Robinson at Claremont, and A. Thomas Kraabel at Luther College in Iowa. My thanks go to all of them. I am especially grateful to James M. Robinson for encouraging me to publish this essay in the **Occasional Papers** series of the Institute, and for providing the **Afterword** for it, wherein the reader will also find a capsule summary of his own interpretation of the historical Jesus.

1. The Jesus Seminar

In March of 1985 Robert Funk, a well known New Testament scholar, presided over the first meeting of a group of scholars that he had convened, dubbed "the Jesus Seminar." Meeting on the campus of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, the group embarked on an unprecedented project, to examine the available sources, canonical and non-canonical, in quest of "the voice of Jesus," i.e. "what he really said."¹ The procedure would be as follows: the group would meet biennially, each meeting focusing on a particular set of sayings attributed to Jesus with discussion of previously circulated position papers, with the view to achieving a consensus on the authenticity or non-authenticity of each of the sayings. After discussion and debate a vote would be taken, with each participant casting a colored bead into a box. There would be four colors: *red*, indicating that Jesus undoubtedly said this, or something very close; *pink*, indicating that Jesus probably said something like this; *gray*, indicating that Jesus did not say this, though the idea(s) contained in it may reflect something of Jesus' own; and *black*, indicating that Jesus did not say anything like it, the saying in question reflecting a different or later tradition.² Each color would be assigned a rating (red=3; pink=2; gray=1; black=0), and the results would be tabulated to achieve a "weighted average" on a scale of 1.00 (.7501 and up = red; .5001 to .7500 = pink; .2501 to .5000 = gray; .0000 to .2500 = black). The tabulated votes would be reflected in the published results, in which sayings attributed to Jesus would be color-coded, in a kind of "red-letter edition" of the gospels.

The Jesus Seminar proceeded in this fashion for six years, averaging around 30 participants per session. From time to time its results would be reported to the press, resulting in newspaper and magazine articles

¹ This first meeting of the Jesus Seminar is briefly discussed by one of the participants, Marcus J. Borg, in a recent book, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994). The quotations are from an excerpt of Robert Funk's address to the assembled group (*ibid.*, 161).

² See discussion in the Introduction to *The Five Gospels*, 35-37 (see p. 4).

intended for public consumption. The attendant publicity was designed to guarantee an awareness of, and stimulate interest in, the work of the Jesus Seminar among the general public, and to create a ready readership for the published results. Part of the project was also the preparation of a new translation of the gospels, prepared by a group within the Seminar, known as "the Scholars Version." This translation, and the work of the Jesus Seminar as a whole, includes the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas*, preserved in a Coptic version as part of the Nag Hammadi Codices discovered in Upper Egypt in 1945.³ The results of all this work appeared in 1993: *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, published by Macmillan in New York. Meanwhile, the Jesus Seminar has embarked on a new phase, designed to answer the question, "What did Jesus really do?"

The Five Gospels includes an extensive Introduction, followed by the translation of, and commentary on, the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and *Thomas*. After each segment ("pericope") of the gospels in which Jesus is quoted as saying something, commentary is provided explaining why the sayings were colored as they were. Special topics are treated in brief "cameo essays" scattered throughout the book. It should be noted that only 18% of the attributed sayings of Jesus are regarded by the Jesus Seminar as authentic, i.e. receiving a rating of either red or pink. Thus a full 82% of the sayings tradition is counted as inauthentic, i.e. rated as black or gray.⁴ Such a surprising result might provide the

³ See James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd revised edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). The *Gospel of Thomas* is the second of seven tractates preserved in NH Codex II (NHLE 124-138). Greek fragments of three different copies of the *Gospel of Thomas* were found at Oxyrhynchus in Upper Egypt in 1897 and 1904 (P. Oxy. 1; P. Oxy. 654; P. Oxy 655). For a critical edition of the Coptic and Greek versions see Bentley Layton ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7: Together with XIII, 2**, BRIT.LIB.OR.4926(1), And P.OXY 1, 654, 655, Vol 1 (Nag Hammadi Studies 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 38-128.

⁴ These figures appear in *The Five Gospels*, 5. At the end of the book there is an index of red- and pink-letter sayings (549-553).

grounds for some scepticism as to the procedures and methods that led to it. As we shall see, such scepticism is not unjustified.

In what follows I shall assess the work of the Jesus Seminar and its results as published in *The Five Gospels*. This will be done with reference to the Seminar's statements in the Introduction, in the commentary to individual pericopes, and in some of the "cameo essays."⁵ Limitations of space preclude a complete discussion of all of the evidence, but the items chosen for discussion should provide enough of a sample to arrive at a critical assessment and some concluding observations. This discussion will proceed under four headings, considering 1) problems of method, 2) historical premises, 3) examples of mistranslation in "the Scholars Version," and 4) problems of interpretation of the 18% of the sayings tradition assigned by the Jesus Seminar to the historical Jesus.

But first, it is necessary to situate the work of the Jesus Seminar in its own historical context as part of the on-going scholarly "quest of the historical Jesus."

2. Quests of the Historical Jesus

Historical investigation of the Jesus tradition untrammelled by theological agendas is the product of the 18th-century Enlightenment. One of the first to undertake such an investigation was the orientalist Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), with whose work Albert Schweitzer begins his classic work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.⁶

⁵ It should be noted that the results of the Jesus Seminar's work do not reflect unanimity; many of the same sayings got red votes from some and black votes from others. Thus, it cannot be assumed that all of the scholars listed in the Roster of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar (*The Five Gospels*, 533-537) agree with everything presented in the commentaries to individual pericopes. The presence of their names in the roster, on the other hand, would seem to require them to bear some responsibility for the published results.

⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Introduction by James M. Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1968), translated by W. Montgomery from the

Reimarus saw in Jesus of Nazareth a Jewish messianic revolutionary whose failure led his followers to steal his body and create a new story of Jesus based on aspects of Jewish messianism. The Christian religion did not grow out of the teaching of Jesus; it is a new creation which gradually unfolded out of a series of failed expectations.⁷

The story of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus," as told by Schweitzer, includes not only rationalist attempts at discrediting traditional Christian teaching, but also attempts by Christian theologians to fend off such critiques by creating an edifice of critical theological scholarship by which a believable "real Jesus" might emerge to view. The result, often enough, was a "modernized" Jesus, one whose ethical genius and message of a "spiritual kingdom" brought him close to the liberal ideas of 19th-century German Protestantism.

Schweitzer's own position on the historical Jesus, present from beginning to end in his famous book but developed especially at the end, is represented by what he calls "thoroughgoing eschatology." This is Schweitzer's lasting contribution to scholarship, even though his own reconstruction of Jesus' short career is open to considerable criticism.⁸

first German edition, *Von Reimarus zur Wrede*, 1906; the English translation was first published in 1910.

⁷ Summarized in Schweitzer, 13-26. Reimarus' work, *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*, was published anonymously after Reimarus' death by Gotthold Lessing in 1778. There is now an English translation of this historic work: *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples*, introduced and translated by George W. Buchanan (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

⁸ See esp. Schweitzer, 330-397. Cf. idem, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God: The Secret of Jesus' Messiahship and Passion* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), translated by Walter Lowrie from the original German, *Das Messianität und Leidensgeheimnis: Eine Skizze des Lebens Jesu*, 1901. For a critical appraisal of Schweitzer's reconstruction see Robinson's Introduction in Schweitzer, *Quest*, xi-xxxiii. Robinson's critique is theologically oriented, and presented from the vantage point of the "New Quest of the Historical Jesus" grounded in existentialist hermeneutics (on which see below). Robinson does not (in 1968) take issue with Schweitzer's insistence on the eschatological nature of Jesus' ministry: "Schweitzer was correct on the issue of historical criticism, in affirming the eschatological nature of Jesus' ministry," xx. Robinson is now more inclined to opt for a "paradigm

19th-century research had opened up new insights into the study of Palestinian Judaism, on the basis of research into the so-called "Pseudepigrapha" of the Hebrew Bible,⁹ that identified a prominent trend in that Judaism called "Jewish apocalyptic." It was inevitable that the teachings and activity of Jesus would be examined in terms of its relationship to Jewish eschatology and the apocalyptic worldview prominent in first-century Jewish Palestine.¹⁰ Schweitzer's discussion of "the eschatological question" in his *Quest* (223-241) culminates with his treatment of Johannes Weiss' epoch-making work on "The Preaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God."¹¹ Weiss had demonstrated unassailably that "the preaching of Jesus was purely eschatological" (241).

Eschatology as such, involving ideas of the last judgment, resurrection, and supernatural deliverance of the elect from temporal earthly existence, is quite foreign to modern (or "post-modern") ways of thinking, and it

shift," a non-apocalyptic Jesus derived from an alleged "preapocalyptic layer lying behind Q" (i.e. the hypothetical sayings source "Q" shared in common by the gospels of Matthew and Luke). See Robinson, "The Q Trajectory: Between John and Matthew via Jesus," in Birger A. Pearson ed., *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 173-194, quotation on p. 189. For a critique of this now popular attempt at finding "layers" in "Q" see Richard Horsley, "Logoi Prophētōn: Reflections on the Genre of Q," in Pearson, 195-209.

⁹ See the two volumes edited by James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983, 1985), esp. Vol. 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*. One of the most important of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha for New Testament study is *1 Enoch*, part of the OT canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

¹⁰ On "apocalypse" as a literary genre and "apocalyptic" or "apocalypticism" as a worldview see e.g. the articles by Paul D. Hanson and John J. Collins on "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1: 279-292, with extensive bibliography. The only "apocalypse" in the Hebrew Bible is Daniel (ca. 164 BCE). The Book of Revelation is the only "apocalypse" as such in the New Testament (cf. the "Little Apocalypse" in Mark 13 and parallels), but much of the NT reflects the apocalyptic worldview.

¹¹ Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892, 3rd ed. by Ferdinand Hahn, 1964). An English translation is available: *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, translated by Richard H. Hiers and David L. Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; repr. Chico: Scholars Press, 1985).

was inevitable that a scholarly struggle would be mounted against it as holding the key to Jesus' teachings.¹² Eschatology was equally distasteful to Albert Schweitzer himself, and herein lies his greatness as a scholar: As a critical historian Schweitzer was constrained by the evidence to situate the historical Jesus squarely within his own temporal-geographic context in first-century Judaism. This Jesus is a foreigner to us: "the historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma."¹³

Ever since Schweitzer the eschatological paradigm has, at least until recently, been dominant in critical scholarship. But in our century theologians learned how to deal "hermeneutically" with an eschatological Jesus. Rudolf Bultmann, the preeminent New Testament scholar of the first half of our century, is a case in point. He could resolve in his own work the "either-or" proposition of Schweitzer: either "thoroughgoing scepticism" or "thoroughgoing eschatology."¹⁴ In his classic treatment of the historical Jesus, *Jesus and the Word*,¹⁵ Bultmann asserted that "we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary."¹⁶ What can be discovered, on the basis of critical assessment of the earliest Palestinian level of tradition, is the essentials of Jesus' message, his "word." This "word" has to do with the coming of the Kingdom of God, a "miraculous eschatological event," but one that has to be interpreted existentially: "the Kingdom of God is a

¹² See chapter 16 of Schweitzer's *Quest*, "The Struggle Against Eschatology," 242-269.

¹³ Schweitzer, *Quest*, 399. Schweitzer nevertheless heard this stranger's call, "Follow me!" (403). From 1913 on, practicing medicine in French Equatorial Africa, he spent the rest of his life (until 1965) testing the truth of the final words in his book: "to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is" (403). Schweitzer received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

¹⁴ See chapter 19 of Schweitzer, *Quest*, 330-397.

¹⁵ New York: Scribners, 1934; translated by Louise P. Smith and Erminie H. Lantero from the original German, *Jesus*, 1926.

¹⁶ Bultmann, 8.

power which, although it is entirely future, wholly determines the present . . . because it now compels man to decision."¹⁷ For Bultmann, a scholarly "quest of the historical Jesus" is not only impossible, but theologically illegitimate because it substitutes worldly proof for faith.

This was the dominant position of the Bultmann school until 1953, when one of Bultmann's students, Ernst Käsemann, in a famous address to the annual gathering of the "old Marburgers" (i.e. fellow Bultmannians), proposed that some interest in the historical Jesus is theologically valid since the Lord of the Church cannot be viewed completely as a mythological being, unconnected to his historical existence. Käsemann's statement set in motion what came to be called the "New Quest of the Historical Jesus."¹⁸ This quest was "new" in the sense that scholarly interest in the historical Jesus, eschewed by Bultmann, was coupled with Bultmann's existentialist hermeneutics. In this view there is, after all, a connection between the eschatological message of Jesus and the christological kerygma ("proclamation") of the church.¹⁹

It is to be noted that the "New Quest," though not lacking interest in key events of Jesus' life, was, like Bultmann himself, primarily interested in the *message* of Jesus and the essentials of his teaching. In order to get at this teaching, critical study of the gospel traditions is required, with the application of form criticism²⁰ and other critical tools. Criteria also have to be devised for determining the authenticity of individual sayings of Jesus. The most important of these criteria, already used by Bultmann,

¹⁷ Bultmann, 45, 51.

¹⁸ See esp. James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Studies in Biblical Theology 25; London: SCM, 1959). The first book on the historical Jesus produced in the Bultmann school since Bultmann's own *Jesus and the Word* was Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus von Nazareth* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1956), translated as *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

¹⁹ Robinson, *New Quest*, esp. 122-123.

²⁰ The classic book on the form criticism of the gospels is Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell/New York: Harper & Row; 2nd ed. 1968), translated by John Marsh from the 2nd edition of *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 1958; first published in 1921.

was dubbed by Norman Perrin "the criterion of dissimilarity": "the earliest form of a saying we can reach may be regarded as authentic if it can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early Church."²¹ Though it is not denied that Jesus' teaching consisted of "variations on themes from the religious life of ancient Judaism," nevertheless, "if we are to seek that which is most characteristic of Jesus," it will be found in the things wherein he differs from Judaism, such things as would be "new and startling to Jewish ears."²² An unstated premise here, of course, is that Jesus was unique among his contemporaries.

While the "New Quest" was dominating German scholarship and American scholarship influenced by it, the "Old Quest" was proceeding as usual in places like Great Britain and North America. More recently there has developed what is sometimes referred to as the "Third Quest,"²³ exemplified by a spate of books continuing unabated. This "Third Quest," unlike the "New" one, lacks a unifying theological agenda, but it is also distinguishable from the first two quests in claiming to lack *any* theological agenda. The unifying factor in such works is the claim that critical historical research, involving careful sifting of the sources, can lead to positive knowledge about who Jesus was. The most important feature of much of the current work is the attempt to situate Jesus squarely within the context of first-century Palestine and Second Temple Judaism.²⁴

²¹ Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 39.

²² Perrin, 39-40. Perrin goes on to discuss other criteria, subsidiary to that of "dissimilarity": "coherence" and "multiple attestation" (*ibid.*, 43-47).

²³ See e.g. N. T. Wright's article, "Quest for the Historical Jesus," part of a larger entry on "Jesus Christ," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3: 796-802.

²⁴ It is not feasible to try to list here all of the relevant works, but I cannot refrain from citing the most ambitious and meticulous of the current works representing the "Third Quest": John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991-). Two volumes have been published (1991, 1994), and a third is forthcoming. For a good survey of recent work see Bruce Chilton and Craig

Another interesting aspect of some of the current research is the use of theoretical models drawn from the social sciences to shed light on the socio-political context in which Jesus operated. Gerd Theissen, for example, sees Jesus as the founder of a "renewal movement within Judaism," and proceeds to subject this "Jesus Movement" (active 30-70 CE) to a functional sociological analysis.²⁵ Jesus and some of his followers are depicted as "wandering charismatics," dependent on sympathizers in the local villages. At one point in his discussion he cites an interesting analogy in the larger Gentile world:

The wandering Cynic philosophers are in some way analogous to the earliest Christian wandering charismatics. They too seem to have led a vagabond existence and also to have renounced home, families, and possessions.²⁶

The Cynics, it will be recalled, were itinerant preachers of a philosophy of freedom from every constraint and a life lived with minimal requirements "according to nature." Flouting social convention, they derived their name (*kynikoi*, "dog-like") from an epithet applied to one of their founders, "the Dog" Diogenes (of Sinope, 4th-cent. BCE), who went about Athens doing in public everything that a dog might do, all the while hurling insults on his contemporaries. The following chreia,²⁷ among many preserved by Diogenes Laertius, is typical:

Evans eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (New Testament Tools and Studies 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994).

²⁵ Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), translated from the German *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung* (Munich: Kaiser, 1977).

²⁶ Theissen, 14-15.

²⁷ A chreia ("anecdotal maxim") is a literary or rhetorical form, consisting of a pregnant saying provided with a brief narrative context. The form occurs widely in Hellenistic and Jewish literature, including the New Testament gospels. Rudolph Bultmann referred to this form as an "apophthegm." See his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 11-69.

One time while masturbating in the market place he said, 'Would that it were possible to relieve hunger simply by rubbing the belly.'²⁸

Since virtually anything is possible nowadays in New Testament scholarship, it was almost a foregone conclusion that Gerd Theissen's throw-away analogy would issue in a number of books and articles depicting Jesus as a Cynic. F. Gerald Downing set about assembling what he took to be "parallels" from the Cynic (but also Stoic!) tradition to items in the Jesus tradition,²⁹ and argues in a more recent work³⁰ that Cynics could have been active in Galilee in Jesus' day because the example of Jesus proves it!

This brings us to the recent work of John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*,³¹ whose dust jacket advertises it as "the first comprehensive determination of who Jesus was, what he did, what he said"! According to Crossan, the eschatological Jesus was foisted on the tradition by the early church. Jesus himself rejected the eschatological message of John the Baptist and adopted an "egalitarian" and "sapiential" teaching and demeanor appropriate to his peasant background. Crossan's handling of his sources produces an astonishing conclusion, in what most people would regard as an oxymoron: "The historical Jesus was, then, a *peasant Jewish Cynic*."³²

²⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 6.46, my translation. Hicks' translation in the Loeb Classical Library edition translates χερουργῶν (lit. "working by hand") more demurely as "behaving indecently."

²⁹ F. Gerald Downing, *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and Other Political Preachers in First-Century Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988). One might just as easily cull the Epicurean tradition in the same fashion for evidence that Jesus was really an Epicurean. That Jesus' teaching "closely resembles the real teaching of Epicurus" was the view of Wolfgang Kirchbach, *Was lehrte Jesus? Zwei Urevangelien* (Berlin, 1897) according to Schweitzer's account, *Quest*, 324. Anyone wanting to update Kirchbach's work will be glad to know about Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson eds., *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991).

³⁰ Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

³¹ San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.

³² Crossan, 421 (his italics).

One can only wonder how Crossan could reach this conclusion, and at least part of the answer is conveniently found in Appendix 1, "An Inventory of the Jesus Tradition by Chronological Stratification and Independent Attestation."³³ Trickster-like, Crossan deftly sets standard critical scholarship on its head by assigning to the earliest stratum (30-60 CE) such sources as the *Gospel of Thomas* (i.e. a supposed "first layer"), Papyrus Egerton 2 and other papyrus fragments, and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, writings usually assigned to the second century.³⁴ He even invents a new gospel of his own which he assigns to this period, the "Cross Gospel," which he reconstructs out of the second-century *Gospel of Peter*.³⁵ To the "second stratum" of tradition (60-80 CE) he assigns the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, his "second layer" of the *Gospel of Thomas*, and a hypothetical "Dialogue Collection" embedded in the *Dialogue of the Savior*, one of the Coptic texts of the Nag Hammadi corpus (NHC III,5).³⁶ Thus, items in early Christian literature that betray a de-eschatologization of tradition are now taken as evidence for a "pre-apocalyptic" Jesus.

I bring up the work of Crossan here because he is Co-Chair of the Jesus Seminar, and has obviously played a prominent role in the making of *The Five Gospels*, to which we now return.³⁷

³³ Crossan, 427-450.

³⁴ See Wilhelm Schneemelcher ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, revised ed., trans. by R. McL. Wilson (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), Vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*. For the items cited here see 110-133; 96-99; 172-178; 216-227.

³⁵ He makes his case for the "Cross Gospel" in another ponderous tome, *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). I know of no one who accepts Crossan's reconstruction.

³⁶ See *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:209-215; 300-311. In the case of the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the existence of an earlier dialogue source is plausible. See esp. the Introduction by Helmut Koester and Elaine Pagels in Stephen Emmel ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex III,5: The Dialogue of the Savior* (Nag Hammadi Studies 26; Leiden: Brill, 1984) 1-17. They assign a late-first century date to the dialogue source and a date in the early second century to the tractate as a whole.

³⁷ Page references in parentheses in what follows are to this book.

3. Methodology of the Jesus Seminar

We have already discussed the procedures by which the Jesus Seminar came to its results as published in *The Five Gospels*. As we saw, the aim of the Seminar was to answer the question, "What did Jesus really say?" The second question, "What did Jesus really do?" was put off to another phase of the project. But this separation of "word" from "deed" is itself untenable, and leads to a distortion of the evidence. Jesus is presented as a "talking head,"³⁸ one that bears little or no relationship to what the historical Jesus, the head's body, did or what was done to him, from his (highly significant!) baptism by John to his (also highly significant!) death on a Roman cross. "Actions speak louder than words," and that is especially true of symbolic actions.³⁹ Thus, a much better case could be made for asking the "deeds" question first and then situating the sayings into that framework, as has been done e.g. by E. P. Sanders.⁴⁰ The Jesus Seminar's exclusive attention to the sayings tradition, reminiscent of the emphases of the now old "New Quest," inevitably issues in skewed results.

In their assessment of the sayings tradition the Jesus Seminar adopted an important rule: "Canonical boundaries are irrelevant in critical assess-

³⁸ This expression is used in a highly critical review of the Jesus Seminar by Richard B. Hays, "The Corrected Jesus," in *First Things* 43 (May 1994) 43-48, esp. 46.

³⁹ For example, silent burning of the American flag is (at least so far!) protected under the "free speech" amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

⁴⁰ See his, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Sanders lists eight "almost indisputable facts" which he takes as his starting point, 11:

1. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.
2. Jesus was a Galilean who preached and healed.
3. Jesus called disciples and spoke of there being twelve.
4. Jesus confined his activity to Israel.
5. Jesus engaged in a controversy about the temple.
6. Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem by the Roman authorities.
7. After his death Jesus' followers continued as an identifiable movement.
8. At least some Jews persecuted at least parts of the new movement

See now also idem, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993).

ments of the various sources of information about Jesus" (35). All words attributed to Jesus in extant material from the first three centuries CE were taken into account, canonical and non-canonical. This is consonant with the stated intent of the Seminar, to act "in accordance with the canons of historical inquiry" (ibid.). This is one of the more laudable aspects of the work of the Jesus Seminar, at least as a statement of intent. Thus, the *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of sayings of Jesus, is included as the fifth gospel in *The Five Gospels*, and fragmentary sayings material is also often included in the commentary.

The dating of some of these sources, however, is open to criticism. In a "cameo essay" on "Stages in the Development of Early Christian Tradition" (128)⁴¹ dates are assigned to the earliest sources, actual and hypothetical. In the case of the *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, a supposed "first edition" of Thomas is assigned to the same period as the hypothetical sayings source "Q" (50-60 CE), its "surviving edition" (more plausibly) to between 100 and 150. No convincing case can be made, however, for an early "first edition" of the *Gospel of Thomas*. While some of its 113 sayings may put us in touch with very early tradition, independent of the canonical gospels, such a finding can only be made by close analysis of each individual saying. The redacted version of those sayings that we have in the *Gospel of Thomas* represents a de-eschatologization of the tradition and is furthermore completely dominated by a (probably Syrian) type of Christianity oriented to mysticism and informed by a myth of the descent and ascent of the soul.⁴² The assumptions about the *Gospel of Thomas* made by the Jesus Seminar are quite naive, though in actual fact even they could only find two of its singly attested sayings (i.e. sayings lacking canonical parallels) to warrant

⁴¹ Cf. also the essay on "The Discovery of the Gospel of Thomas" (474).

⁴² On this variety of early Christianity see Bentley Layton on "the School of St. Thomas" in his source book, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987) 359-409. Gregory J. Riley argues in his *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) for an early date for the beginnings of the "Thomas Tradition" but not for the *Gospel of Thomas* as we know it.

so much as a pink rating (Sayings 97 and 98), a judgment with which I have no quarrel.

Much of the methodology of the Jesus Seminar is, of course, standard and based on the results of two centuries of critical scholarship. The basic critical approach is presented in a discussion of seven "pillars of scholarly wisdom" in the Introduction to *The Five Gospels*. The first four of these are:

1. The distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Christian faith.
2. Preference for the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) over John as sources for the historical Jesus.
3. The chronological priority of the Gospel of Mark.
4. The hypothetical source "Q" used independently by Matthew and Luke (3).

These four pillars represent the findings of 19th-century scholarship now commonly accepted. The last three reflect more recent trends:

5. "The liberation of the non-eschatological Jesus . . . from Schweitzer's eschatological Jesus."
6. The fundamental contrast between an oral culture, such as that of Jesus, and a print culture.
7. The "burden of proof" on those who argue for authenticity, rather than on those who argue for inauthenticity (4-5).

The last two "pillars" lead to the development of elaborate "rules of oral evidence" and "rules of attestation" that reflect refinements of older discussions of form-history and criteria for determining authenticity, such as "multiple attestation" (25-30).⁴³

One interesting holdover from the old "New Quest" is the criterion of dissimilarity, referred to here as "distinctive discourse" (30). The

⁴³ Cf. note 22 (above).

"distinctiveness" of Jesus vis-à-vis the early Christian tradition is, of course, one of the refinements of the first "pillar of scholarly wisdom." That "Jesus was not the first Christian" (24) is a fundamental starting point for critical research in the study of the Jesus tradition, for there can be no denying that early Christian faith has not only preserved but heavily impacted the Jesus tradition. The other side of this criterion, however, is not so obvious. The Jesus Seminar describes Jesus' "distinctive discourse" as follows:

Jesus' characteristic talk was distinctive

Jesus' sayings and parables cut against the social and religious grain. . . .

Jesus' sayings and parables surprise and shock: they characteristically call for a reversal of roles or frustrate ordinary, everyday expectations (30-31).

While there is some truth to these observations, such as the "call for a reversal of roles" that is prominent in the Jesus tradition, the overall thrust of the application of this emphasis on the "distinctiveness" of Jesus in the work of the Jesus Seminar is that the historical Jesus must be viewed *over against* the Jewish society and religion in which he was reared.

The key feature of the Jesus Seminar's method, which also inevitably results in the rejection of 82% of the sayings tradition from the data base of Jesus' authentic sayings, is reflected in pillar five, the rejection of eschatology. The following comments are highly instructive:

The eschatological Jesus reigned supreme among gospel scholars from the time of Weiss and Schweitzer to the end of World War II. Slowly and surely the evidence began to erode that view The creation of the Jesus Seminar coincides with the reemergence of interest in the Jesus of history, which was made possible by the wholesale shift of biblical scholarship away from its earlier academic home in the church, seminaries, and isolated theological enclaves. . . . As that interest came back to life in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars were surprised to learn that they no longer labored under the tyranny of either neo-orthodoxy or an eschatological

Jesus. . . . The liberation of the non-eschatological Jesus of the aphorisms and parables from Schweitzer's eschatological Jesus is the fifth pillar of contemporary scholarship (3-4).

The "evidence" leading to the "erosion" of the eschatological Jesus paradigm is not cited, for the very good reason that it does not exist! On the contrary, all of the real evidence that has come to light since Weiss and Schweitzer --the massive evidence now available in the Dead Sea Scrolls is probably the most important-- only serves to confirm the fact that the apocalyptic worldview was pervasive in first-century Jewish Palestine. And this evidence is of direct relevance to the study of the historical Jesus.⁴⁴ So one begins to wonder about a possible "hidden agenda" in the rejection of eschatology by the Jesus Seminar.

With the gospel of "liberation" from the "tyranny" of the eschatological Jesus so fervently embraced, what paradigm does the Jesus Seminar propose to put in its place? Answer: "the laconic sage":

Jesus does not as a rule initiate dialogue or debate, nor does he offer to cure people.

Jesus rarely makes pronouncements or speaks about himself in the first person.

Jesus makes no claim to be the Anointed, or messiah. . . . Like the cowboy hero of the American West exemplified by Gary Cooper, the sage of the ancient Near East was laconic, slow to speech, a person of few words. The sage does not provoke encounters. . . .

As a rule, the sage is self-effacing, modest, unostentatious (32).

An obvious question that the Jesus Seminar has not entertained, but will presumably have to be faced in its future work, is this: Who would want to crucify a laconic sage, even one whose discourse is "distinctive"? And why?

⁴⁴ See now esp. Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 25; Leiden: Brill, 1995), esp. 83-154 on the Qumran material. See also n. 66, below.

4. Historical Premises of the Jesus Seminar

The approach taken by the Jesus Seminar brings with it a number of historical premises, most of them unwarranted or unsupportable. These premises inform the choice of colors to be assigned to the sayings of Jesus. Some of these premises arise from the Seminar's *a priori* rejection of eschatology; others are based on other factors. Here are my comments on a few of them:

- P.S. worksheet
a. John "the Baptist" is one of the more colorful figures in first-century Palestine, attested both in the New Testament and in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus.⁴⁵ Preaching a message of repentance, in preparation for the coming of God in judgment, he offered his hearers a purificatory bath ("baptism") in the waters of the Jordan river as a sign of their repentance and the forgiveness of their sins. This would enable them to escape the wrath of God's coming judgment and the "unquenchable fire" of hell (Matt 3:1-12 and parallels). We do not know the names of very many of the Jews who underwent this baptism and became John's followers, but we do know the name of one: Yeshu`a bar Yoseph of Nazareth (or "Nazara"), better known as Jesus of Nazareth.

The Jesus Seminar will now have us believe that Jesus, after his baptism by John, rejected John's "mentality" of impending cataclysm, "quit the ascetic desert, and returned to urban Galilee" where he "took up eating and drinking and consorting with toll collectors and sinners, and developed a different point of view" (4), one much like that of "the Cynic philosophers who probably wandered about Galilee in Jesus' day" (316). The apocalyptic worldview characteristic of John the Baptist and early Christians such as Paul and others was attributed to Jesus by his followers after his death; they, in turn, had learned it from John the Baptist (40-41, 135). Jesus himself did not proclaim "that the end of the age was near";

⁴⁵ *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.116-19.

rather he "spoke most characteristically of God's rule as close or already present but unrecognized" (40). Accordingly, virtually all of the sayings in the Jesus tradition that refer to the future kingdom of God, or judgment, rewards and punishments after death, etc., are colored black by the Seminar.

By what canon of historiography such a view of Jesus is developed is a mystery, for it is not only intrinsically improbable but strains credulity to the breaking point.

That early Christians reinterpreted Jesus' message in the interests of their developing Christology is, of course, most probable, but these early Christians also preserved much of Jesus' own teaching. Indeed, a common-sense application of historical method can distinguish between Jesus' eschatology, focusing on the "coming" of God's "kingdom" or "rule," and that of the early church, focusing on the "coming" (i.e. return) of Jesus as the heavenly "Son of Man" (presumably in view of the non-arrival of the kingdom coupled with a belief in his resurrection from the dead).⁴⁶ Jesus referred to himself enigmatically as "the Son of Man"; it is probably early Christian interpretation of the Jesus tradition that explicated this self-designation in terms of an interpretation of Daniel 7:13, with its reference to "one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven."⁴⁷ Thus, there is a clear distinction between the expectation of a coming "kingdom" and the expectation of a coming heavenly "Son of Man."⁴⁸ To attribute the latter to early Christian interpretation is fully in

⁴⁶ An illustration of this is found in a comparison between Mark 9:1, where Jesus predicts the imminent coming of the "kingdom of God," and its parallel in Matt 16:28, where he predicts the imminent "coming in his kingdom" of "the Son of Man."

⁴⁷ The interpretation of the "Son of Man" sayings in the gospels is one of the most contentious topics in New Testament research. My own view, reflected here though not elaborated, is only one of many possibilities. See the excellent summary by George W.E. Nickelsburg in his article, "Son of Man," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6:137-150, with extensive bibliography.

⁴⁸ One of the problems in Schweitzer's reconstruction of the historical Jesus is that he failed to notice this distinction. Cf. n. 8 (above).

accord with intrinsic probability, but it is intrinsically improbable that both are the product of early Christian interpretation. Even more improbable is the notion that early Christians consciously rejected a non-eschatological message of Jesus in favor of one gotten from John the Baptist, whose message, in turn, Jesus himself is supposed to have rejected. But this is the view of the Jesus Seminar, and the premise upon which they color Jesus' eschatological sayings black. Of course, they also have to color black Jesus' depiction of John as "more than a prophet" and "the messenger" predicted in Malachi 3:1 (Matt 11:9-10 // Luke 7:26-27, a "Q" saying), and similar sayings about John.

b. How did the Jesus tradition get its eschatology? The Jesus Seminar has a ready answer: "Q people." These are people who carried out some sort of (unspecified) mission in Galilee and who resentfully developed a message of judgment against the people of villages there who did not respond positively. For example, the "woes" (which the Jesus Seminar transforms into curses)⁴⁹ against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt 11:20-24 // Luke 10:13-15, "Q") were not pronounced by Jesus but by "prophets" of the "Q community" (181, 320). Jesus' refusal to provide any "sign" except that of Jonah, and his prophecy of judgment against "this generation" (Matt 12:39-42 // Luke 11:29-32, "Q") is likewise attributed to the "Q community" on the grounds that Jesus "did not share the common apocalyptic view that the end of history was near, nor did he threaten judgment" (332; cf. 188). One finds throughout *The Five Gospels* such references to the "Q community" or "Q people," supposedly active in Galilee in the period ca. 40-60 CE. Who were these people?

That there were followers of Jesus in Galilee after his death is, indeed, probable. The problem is that we have no evidence at all about them. The only Galilean followers of Jesus of whom we have any record are the ones referred to in the Acts of the Apostles (chs. 1-12) as active in the

⁴⁹ See discussion of the Scholars Version, below.

formation of the church in *Jerusalem*, people like Simon Peter and Jesus' brother James (Jacob). We can suppose (though the Jesus Seminar does not) that the Galileans in Jerusalem were in contact with those back home in Galilee, and later with Jesus believers in places like Caesarea and Antioch on the Orontes, but our evidence is scanty (Acts 10-15). The "Q community" of the Jesus Seminar is, in fact, extrapolated from a supposed "apocalyptic" second layer of the hypothetical "Q" and lacks any evidentiary support. Indeed, it is not all that obvious that the authors of Matthew and Luke got their copies of "Q" from co-religionists in Galilee, or that "Q" was produced there. So the Galilean "Q community" is, simply, a figment of scholarly imagination.⁵⁰

c. One of the items in the gospel tradition that is usually taken for granted is that Jesus had twelve disciples.⁵¹ The Jesus Seminar would seem to dispute this, although the issue of "the Twelve" as such is not discussed. They grant that Jesus had followers, both men and women, but they argue that Jesus did not actively recruit them. Thus, Jesus' call to Simon and Andrew (Mark 1:16) is colored gray. It is argued that Jesus, as "an itinerant sage without institutional goals," did not recruit people, but he might have used the metaphor of "fishing for people" in another context (41). Elsewhere the exhortation "Follow me" is colored black, with one exception: "Follow me, and leave it to the dead to bury their own dead" (Matt 8:22 // Luke 9:59-60, "Q"). This reply to a would-be follower who first wants to bury his father is colored pink on the grounds that it "contradicts traditional familial relationships" and advises the potential

⁵⁰ For two recent examples of imagination run amok in "Q" scholarship see Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993); and Leif Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus' First Followers According to Q* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994). For a critique of Mack see James M. Robinson, "The History-of-Religions Taxonomy of Q: The Cynic Hypothesis," in Holger Preißler and Hubert Seiwert eds., *Gnosisforschung und Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Kurt Rudolph zum 65. Geburtstag* (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1994 [1995] 247-265. For a similar critique of Vaage, see Robinson, "Galilean Upstarts: A Sot's Cynical Disciples?," forthcoming in another *Festschrift*.

⁵¹ This is one of the "almost indisputable facts" cited by Sanders (cf. n. 40).

follower "to dishonor his father," something not only socially unacceptable but a violation of one of the Ten Commandments (160, 317). This interpretation of the pericope requires us to assume that the potential follower is actually arranging for, or about to arrange for, the burial of a father who has just died, something that is not given in the text.⁵² In any case, Jesus' attitude toward the commandment in question is clearly enough stated in a discussion with some Pharisees where he brings up their *halakah* (legal interpretation, lit. "walking") on *qorban*, (meaning "consecrated to God") a passage that the Seminar regards as inauthentic (Matt 15:3-9, grey // Mark 7:6-8, black).

As Jesus did not recruit followers for a special mission, so also did he not have a "mission" of his own: "he probably did not think of his work as a program he was sent to carry out" (47). Accordingly, all of the "I have come . . ." pronouncements of Jesus, i.e. those announcing his mission (e.g. Mark 2:17; Luke 12:49-51), are regarded by the Seminar as inauthentic (343).

d. It is usually assumed by critical scholars that Jesus restricted his activity to Israel, i.e. his fellow Jews.⁵³ The Jesus Seminar, however, believes that "a restricted mission was not characteristic of Jesus." Thus, Jesus' command to his disciples not to go to non-Israelites or Samaritans but to restrict their activity to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6) is colored black as reflecting "the point of view of a Judaizing branch" of the early church (167-168). Jesus himself "is believed to have had frequent contact with gentiles in the towns and cities around the Sea of Galilee" (204), presumably to stay in touch with the (historically unattested!)

⁵² The Seminar's interpretation of this passage is a common one, especially in German scholarship, and is surprisingly even upheld by E. P. Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 252-255). Geza Vermes provides a more plausible scenario: the man's father is not dead yet, and the son's eventual filial responsibility is an excuse for procrastination. See his *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 27-29.

⁵³ This is another of Sander's "almost indisputable facts."

"Cynic philosophers who probably wandered about Galilee in Jesus' day" (316).

In fact, there were a number of predominantly gentile cities in Galilee. The most important of these were Tiberias, on the shore of the lake, and Sepphoris, a rather short distance from Jesus' home village of Nazareth (ca. 7 km. as the crow flies). But these cities are conspicuous in the gospel tradition by their absence! The geographical information we have, such as it is, suggests that Jesus restricted his activity for the most part to the Jewish villages of rural Galilee.

Tyre and Sidon, on the Phoenician coast, are mentioned in the tradition, but it is not reported that Jesus went into these cities, only that he spent some time in their "environs" (μέρη, lit. "parts" - Matt 15:21 par.), where he is reported to have healed a "Canaanite" or "Syrophoenician" (Mark 7:26) woman's daughter. Zaraphath, a place located between Tyre and Sidon, was the site of a healing miracle reportedly performed by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24), an event mentioned in one of Jesus' sayings (Luke 4:26, colored black by the Seminar). But why Jesus went to this district, if he did, we do not know.

Similarly, Caesarea Philippi appears in the sources (Banias in northern Gaulanitis, now part of the Golan, the site of a sacred grotto dedicated to the god Pan), but again Jesus is not represented as going into the city but only its "environs" (μέρη again - Matt 16:13) or "villages" (κῶμαι - Mark 8:27). Site of Peter's "confession" (Mark 8:27-30 par), the area, located at the foot of Mt. Hermon, was part of Israel's "sacred geography."⁵⁴

The Decapolis, east of the Sea of Galilee, is also mentioned in the tradition (Matt 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31). The well known story of Jesus' exorcism of demons who entered swine and caused them to plunge into the lake to

⁵⁴ See George W.E. Nickelsburg, "Enoch, Levi, and Peter: Recipients of Revelation in Upper Galilee," *JBL* 100 (1981) 575-600, esp. 582-586; 590-600.

their deaths (Matt 8:28-34 // Mark 5:1-20 // Luke 8:26-39) is variously located in the "region of the Gadarenes" (χώραν τῶν Γαδαρηνῶν - Matt 8:28) or the "region of the Gerasenes" (χώραν τῶν Γερασηνῶν - Mark 5:1 // Luke 8:26). Gadara, modern Umm Qeis, the home of the Cynic philosopher Menippus (3rd cent. BCE) and the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus (1st cent. BCE), and Gerasa, modern Jerash, were both prominent cities of the Decapolis (i.e. "ten cities"). It is noteworthy that a textual variant Γεργεσηνῶν, "of the Gergesenes," appears in all three gospels, attested in numerous manuscripts and versions, and may very well be the correct reading. Gadara is located at a considerable distance from the Sea of Galilee, Gerasa even further. The obscure Gergesa, modern Kursi, is located on the lakeshore, a more likely setting for the exorcism story.⁵⁵ The manuscript tradition, with its variants, probably reflects a scribal substitution of more familiar places in the Decapolis, Gadara and Gerasa, for the obscure Gergesa.

To be sure, one cannot necessarily take as historically reliable all of the geographical references in the gospel tradition, or the stories associated with them, but it is a telling fact that in no case at all is there any reference to "urban Galilee" (4) or the gentile cities as the locus of Jesus' activity!⁵⁶

⁵⁵ For a brief but useful discussion see John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav, *Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 97-99.

⁵⁶ There is a considerable literature on the question of the extent of Jewish cultural and religious influence in Galilee. For a recent discussion see Shmuel Safrai, "The Jewish Cultural Nature of Galilee in the First Century," in Malcolm Lowe ed., *The New Testament and Christian Jewish Dialogue: Studies in Honor of David Flusser*, *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990) 147-186. For recent discussions of the archaeological evidence and its bearing on Jesus research see James F. Strange, "First-Century Galilee from Archaeology and from the Texts," Richard A. Horsley, "The Historical Jesus and Archaeology of the Galilee: Questions from Historical Jesus Research to Archaeologists," and Douglas E. Oakman, "The Archaeology of First-Century Galilee and the Social Interpretation of the Historical Jesus," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) 81-90, 91-135, 220-251. See now also Seán Freyne, "Jesus and the Urban Culture of Galilee," in Tord Fornberg and David Hellholm (eds.), *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts: Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman* (Oslo:

e. The assumption that Jesus had regular contact with gentiles in their urban centers leads to a gross misunderstanding of Jesus' relationship to the Jewish Law. We have already encountered the claim that Jesus advocated violating one of the Ten Commandments (160, 317). Thus it is no surprise to find the Jesus Seminar claiming that Jesus set about "undermining a whole way of life" by hurling "a categorical challenge to the laws governing pollution and purity" (69). This claim is based on the saying, "It's not what goes into a person from the outside that can defile; rather it's what comes out of the person that defiles" (Mark 7:14 par, colored pink). The saying in question, set in the context of Jesus' challenge to a specific Pharisaic *halakah* regarding hand-washing, does not represent "a categorical challenge to the laws" because there were no such "laws" in the Torah, only, in this case, a Pharisaic opinion regarding purity. In Mark 7:19b (without parallel) we read (in the Revised Standard Version) the following parenthetical comment: "(Thus he declared all foods clean)."⁵⁷ This is clearly a late gloss, representing a gentile Christian misunderstanding of Jesus' saying. Though the Jesus Seminar takes no notice of this gloss in its translation, its interpretation of the saying is in accord with this gentile misunderstanding, and just as perverse as an interpretation of Jesus' own pronouncement!

Similarly, the injunction to traveling disciples, "whenever you enter a town and they welcome you, eat whatever is set before you" (Luke 10:8, colored pink) is taken by the Jesus Seminar as an indication that Jesus advocated a non-observance of kosher laws (319), or indeed that "Jesus apparently ignored, or deliberately transgressed, food laws" (481, commenting on the [obviously secondary] parallel in Thomas 14). But

Scandinavian University Press, 1995) 597-622; and Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995).

⁵⁷ The SV reads Mark 7:19b as a comment on the digestive process described in 7:19a: "'... because it doesn't get to the heart but passes into the stomach, and comes out in the outhouse?' (This is how everything we eat is purified)." Considerable liberties have been taken with the text of 7:19b, which reads καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα (lit. "purifying [or declaring pure] all foods").

this interpretation is only possible if we accept the assumption of the Jesus Seminar that Jesus regularly dined in gentile homes, which we have no reason to believe is the case. In fact, there is not a single instance in the Jesus tradition, including the data base accepted by the Seminar as authentic, in which it can be shown that Jesus violates, or counsels others to violate, the Jewish Law.⁵⁸

Consistent with the Jesus Seminar's portrayal of Jesus as a habitual violator of the Law is their representation of him as a "party animal," with a reputation for being "a glutton and a drunk" (e.g. 49, 180, 303). This view of Jesus, given prominence in *The Five Gospels*, is ultimately based on a saying of Jesus that the scholars color gray:

Just remember, John appeared on the scene neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He is demented.' The son of Adam came both eating and drinking, and they say, 'There's a glutton and a drunk, a crony of toll collectors and sinners!' (Matt 11:18-19 // Luke 7:33-34, "Q").

The contrast set up by Jesus between himself and the ascetic John the Baptist appealed to the Seminar, but a gray vote resulted because of the presence in the saying of the supposedly "apocalyptic" figure of the Son of Man (which they translate as "son of Adam").

In a cameo essay on "Feasting and Fasting" another contrast between Jesus and John is discussed. The claim is made that Jesus did not practice fasting, as did John the Baptist and his followers. "The early Christian community immediately reverted to fasting as a religious practice," thus departing from the practice of their master (48). Such a view of Jesus fits

⁵⁸ This is the view of Vermes, a prominent Jewish scholar who, unlike the Jesus Seminar, is thoroughly familiar with the ancient Jewish evidence, *Religion of Jesus the Jew* (cit. n. 52), esp. ch. 2: "Jesus and the Law; The Judaism of Jesus," 11-45. The strange saying in *Gos. Thom.* 14:1-2 ("If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits") is alien enough to the authentic Jesus tradition that even the Jesus Seminar colors it black.

well the assumption of the Seminar that Jesus consistently violated every provision of his religious tradition, and taught others to do the same.

f. In the gospel tradition Jesus is often presented in dialogue with his opponents on points of law, using scripture to buttress his arguments. All such cases are regarded as inauthentic by the Seminar on the assumption that the historical Jesus did not invoke scripture, but rather "taught on his own authority" (e.g. 68; cf. 201), presumably because he lacked training in scripture interpretation (e.g. 236). While one might argue with some plausibility that Jesus' education was limited,⁵⁹ it is odd that the Seminar, while assuming his ignorance of scripture on points of law, also grants him enough knowledge of particular scriptural texts and traditions to create subtle "spoofs" on them, or "parodies" of them, in his parables.⁶⁰

g. Among the opponents of Jesus in the gospel tradition the Pharisees stand out in greatest relief. Thus, it is with some surprise that we find in *The Five Gospels* the suggestion that there were no Pharisees in Galilee in Jesus' time; Pharisees were only active there after the Jewish War of 66-70 (217, 239, 242, 244, 369). This claim is made despite the fact that the parable of the Pharisee and the toll collector (Luke 18:10-14) is colored pink. Even in their commentary to that parable they say, "it would be anachronistic to portray Jesus as engaged in polemics with them or about them in Galilee during his life" (369).

Here we encounter an astonishing misunderstanding of the facts. It is, of course, true that some of the wholesale denunciations of Pharisees in the gospel tradition, such as those in Matthew 23, reflect the bitter polemics of

⁵⁹ For a careful analysis of the probable extent of Jesus' education see Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (cit. n. 24) 1:268-278. On Jesus' use of scripture in both Hebrew and Aramaic (Targumic traditions) see Bruce D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus' Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1984). It is very strange to see Chilton's name on the roster of Jesus Seminar "Fellows," 534!

⁶⁰ Examples are cited below, section 6.

Jesus-believing Jews against leading Jews of the developing normative Judaism of the late first century.⁶¹ But by that time the Pharisees (*perushim*, i.e. "separatists") are no longer a competing party within a variegated Second Temple Judaism. The Pharisaic interpretation of Torah is in the process of being established as normative ("rabbinic") Judaism, both in Galilee and in Judea, and the term "Pharisee" is falling out of use as a party designation. In Matthew 23 and similar passages it is used, together with "hypocrite," as a code-word of reproach in an intercommunity (but arguably still intra-Jewish) rivalry. As to the earlier situation in Galilee, there is no reason at all to doubt the presence of groups of Pharisees there in the Jewish towns and villages, and probably even in the Jewish minority communities living in the Hellenistic cities.⁶² And there is every reason to believe that Jesus of Nazareth entered into debate with them.

Other examples of the Jesus Seminar's distortion of the historical record could be cited, but enough has been said of this set of distortions because there are others yet to take up.

5. The "Scholars Version" Translation

The intent of "the Scholars Version" (SV, samples of which have been given in the previous section), as stated in a preface to *The Five Gospels*, is to "desacralize" the text of the gospels and make the translation "sound like a piece of contemporary literature" (xvi) by using "the common street

⁶¹ See esp. Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. ch. 3, "Matthew's Opponents: Israel's Leaders," 44-67. The "woe" pronouncement at Matt 23:15 may be an authentic saying of Jesus, and the reference to the making of converts may reflect actual attempts on the part of Pharisees to attract other Jews to Pharisaic teachings. On this passage see now Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 69-72. (I owe this reference to A. Thomas Kraabel.)

⁶² A convenient summary of the evidence on the Pharisees, with extensive bibliography, is provided in Saldarini's article, "Pharisees," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5: 289-303.

language of the original" (xiv). The scholars have succeeded in this effort brilliantly, whatever one might think of the claim that the original language of the gospels was "street language." Somewhat incongruously, they also demonstrate their commitment to "political correctness" with irritating manipulations of grammatical gender and number. For example, the "child" in Matthew 18:2 (neuter both in Greek and in English) becomes a "she" in the SV rendition (213). "He who seeks" in *Thomas* 2 becomes "those who seek" in SV (471).

In what follows I shall discuss the SV translations of some of the key words or phrases used frequently in the Jesus tradition. As we shall see, "mistranslation" is often a better term for what the scholars are doing.

a. "God's imperial rule" for ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ("the kingdom of God") (Mark 1:14 *et passim*). The Greek word usually translated "kingdom" can also mean "reign" or "rule" (Aramaic *malkuta'*, Hebrew *malkut*). Why "imperial" is added is nowhere explained, and is odd in view of the role played by the Roman *imperium* in Jewish Palestine. SV translates βασιλεύς ("king") in Jesus' parables as "secular ruler" (e.g. Matt 18:23, colored pink).

b. "I swear to God" for ἀμην λέγω ὑμῖν (σοι) ("amen" or "truly I say to you [pl. or sg.]") (e.g. John 13:20, colored gray). This use of "amen" (a Hebrew word used in oaths, promises, prayers, etc.) is variously translated in SV, e.g. "I swear to you" (Matt 5:26, pink), "I tell you" (Luke 12:59, pink), "so help me!" (Mark 14:30, black), "let me tell you" (Luke 22:34, black). Perhaps this use of "amen" in Jesus' discourse was a factor in the Seminar's coloring of Jesus' command "Don't swear at all" (Matt 5:34, gray), though this is not stated in the commentary (143). In any case, it seems to have escaped the notice of the scholars that Jesus' use of "amen" is religious language, not "street language."

c. "the son of Adam" for ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ("the Son of Man") (Mark 2:28 *et passim*). The scholars explain their translation in a "cameo essay," and refer to three different senses of "son of Adam" in the Hebrew Bible: an insignificant human being, as in Job 25:4-6; human beings as next to God in the order of creation, as in Psalm 8:3-6; and "the Apocalyptic Figure" of Daniel 7:13-14 (76-77). In all three cases the translation "son of Adam" is wrong! In Job 25:6 ("how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!" [RSV]) *'enosh* ("man") and *ben 'adam* ("son of man") mean essentially the same thing, "a human being." *'adam* by itself means the same, i.e. generic "man." In the poetry of Job the juxtaposition of the two terms is a case of synonymous parallelism, one of the most common features of Hebrew poetry, and Semitic diction in general. In Hebrew "a son of X" means "a man with the quality of X"; a "daughter of X" means "a woman with the quality of X," as e.g. in Hannah's plea in 1 Samuel 1:16 not to regard her as "a base woman" (*bat beli'al*, lit. "daughter of worthlessness"). "Son of man" thus means the same as "man," i.e. human being, though "son of" might be taken to indicate that the human being in question is male, but not necessarily (as in Job 25 and Psalm 8). Psalm 8:4 (8:5 in Hebrew) is another instance of what we see in Job 25:6, with the juxtaposition of *'enosh* and *ben 'adam*.

Daniel 7:13 is translated by our scholars:

As I looked, in a night vision, I saw one like a son of Adam coming with heaven's clouds. He came to the Ancient of Days and was presented to him.

This passage is construed by the Seminar in terms of Genesis 1:28, where "the human being" (Adam) is depicted as "the agent to exercise control over every living creature" (77). But the Genesis story of Adam is irrelevant to the interpretation of Daniel 7:13, for "son of Adam" does not occur there. No notice seems to be taken by our scholars that the text of Daniel 7:13 is not Hebrew but Aramaic! It is read as though the text had

ben 'adam, which it does not. It has *kebar 'enash* ("one like a son of man" or "one like a human being").

Aramaic was the language of Jesus. In the gospel sayings the enigmatic self-designation "the Son of Man" renders Aramaic *bar 'enasha'*, which means essentially "the human being." What Jesus meant by this term, or even if he used it at all, is a matter of considerable controversy in New Testament scholarship.⁶³ In a discussion of Jesus' usage in the aforementioned "cameo essay," three different meanings are assigned to "son of Adam": 1) the heavenly figure who is to come, 2) one who is to suffer, die, and rise, "a roundabout way of saying 'I'" (e.g. in the passion predictions in Mark 8:31; 9:30; and 10:33, colored black), and 3) "human beings" in general.

The comment on 1) contains a surprising statement: "On the lips of Jesus those references to the apocalyptic figure of the future are not self-references but allusions to a third person" (77). This is surprising because it seems to suggest that Jesus did, after all, have an eschatological doctrine. The verses quoted as examples (Mark 8:38; 13:26; and 14:62) are all colored black, though it is reported in the commentary to Mark 13:26 that some members of the Seminar share the view "that Jesus may have spoken about the son of Adam as a messianic figure other than himself" (113). But they were decisively outvoted.

One interesting example of 3) in the Seminar's interpretation is the one and only "Son of Man" saying in the *Gospel of Thomas*, saying 86 (colored pink): "Foxes have their dens and birds have their nests but human beings have no place to lay down and rest." This translation of "the Son of Man" as "human beings" creates a statement that is absurd on its face:

⁶³ See note 47 (above).

animals and birds have homes, but people don't!⁶⁴ The point here, finally, is that the Jesus Seminar's "son of Adam" amounts to a mistranslation wherever it is used.

d. "congratulations" for μακάριος ("blessed") (Matt 5:3 *et passim*). Macarisms pronounced on "the poor" and other people by Jesus are all rendered this way. But to render "blessed" everywhere with "congratulations" would lead to even more absurd results; so alternatives do occur, e.g. "lucky" as applied to Jesus' mother's womb and breasts (Thomas 79) or "fortunate" as applied to the "eyes" of the disciples (Matt 13:16). In general, "congratulations" might be an appropriate translation of μακάριος in certain cases in Greek literature, but Jesus spoke Aramaic, and probably read Hebrew. "Congratulations" is an impossible rendering of 'ashar ("happy") or berikh (Heb. *barukh*, "[divinely] blessed"). Even as a translation of the Greek, one wonders what "the poor" would have accomplished for which "congratulations" are in order. In short, this example of "street language" amounts to a distortion of the text.

e. "damn" for οὐαί ("woe"). Most of the woes pronounced by Jesus, transformed into curses by our scholars, are colored black. But here is a pink one, hurled at the Pharisees: "Damn you, Pharisees! You're so fond of the prominent seat in synagogues and respectful greetings in marketplaces" (Luke 11:43).⁶⁵ My only comment to this use of "street language" by the Jesus Seminar is that even first year biblical students ought to know the difference between a "woe" oracle, or pronouncement of "woe," and a curse. To be sure, the Jesus Seminar could have taken their street language a little further, with a dose of scatology. Why not "shithouse" instead of "outhouse" (ἀφροδών, "latrine") at Mark 7:19?

⁶⁴ Oddly enough, the same saying in Luke 9:58 has, instead, "... but the son of Adam has nowhere to rest his head." This is one of a number of inconsistencies in *The Five Gospels*.

⁶⁵ As already noted (discussion above), the scholars do not think that there were any Pharisees in Galilee in Jesus' day; here they grant the existence of enough of them for Jesus to curse them.

6. The Jesus Seminar's Interpretation of Its Data Base

The "authentic" material in the Jesus sayings tradition comprises 18% of the total, according to the Jesus Seminar. This, in the view of the scholars, is the non-eschatological part of the tradition. But is it really? The fact is that eschatology is there, too, willy-nilly, and it requires a hermeneutical juggling act of considerable dexterity to remove it. I can only treat some examples of their juggling act here, and do so under three different rubrics.

a. "God's Imperial Rule." In a "cameo essay," "God's Imperial Rule: Present or Future?" (136-137), the Seminar provides examples of sayings in which God's rule is future (Mark 13:24-27,30; Mark 9:1) and present (Luke 17:20-21; *Thomas* 113; Luke 11:20; Luke 11:2). The future-oriented "apocalyptic" sayings are in accord with the views of John the Baptist and the early Christian community. The question is,

Did Jesus share this view, or was his vision more subtle, less bombastic and threatening?

The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar are inclined to the second option: Jesus conceived of God's rule as all around him but difficult to discern. God was so real for him that he could not distinguish God's present activity from any future activity. He had a poetic sense of time in which the future and the present merged, simply melted together, in the intensity of his vision (137).

The Seminar takes the following saying as "a key in identifying Jesus' temporal views" (364; cf. 531):

You won't be able to observe the coming of God's imperial rule. People are not going to say, "Look, here it is!" or "Over there!" On the contrary, God's imperial rule is right there in your presence. (Luke 17:20f., pink)

It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, "Look here!" or "Look there!" Rather, the Father's imperial rule is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it (*Thomas* 113:2-4, pink).

This saying, addressed to "Pharisees" in Luke and Jesus' "disciples" in *Thomas*, lacks a narrative context in either. But is this saying really a non-eschatological saying? Indeed, I would submit that eschatology is present in it "right there in (the scholars') presence," but they "don't see it."

The key to a proper interpretation of this saying is provided by the next one which the scholars cite as exemplifying Jesus' "poetic sense of time": "But if by God's finger I drive out demons, then for you God's imperial rule has arrived" (Luke 11:20, pink). This saying is set in a larger context in which Jesus has exorcised a demon and is then accused by some as being in league with the Devil, referred to here as "Beelzebul" and "Satan" (Luke 11:14-26 // Matt 12:22-32 // Mark 3:22-29). In this context Jesus also says, in a saying our scholars also color pink: "If Satan is divided against himself—since you claim I drive out demons in Beelzebul's name—how will his kingdom endure?" (Luke 11:18).

Jesus' reference to "Satan" is part and parcel of his dualistic apocalyptic worldview, not "some subtle irony," as the scholars would have it (330). In this key passage Jesus claims that his exorcisms are a sign of the arrival of the kingdom of God and an attack on the domain of Satan, i.e. part of an end-time struggle between the forces of God and Satan.⁶⁶

The third saying the scholars cite as illustrating the presence of God's rule is a surprising one because it does not fit the category:

Father, your name be revered. Impose your imperial rule (Luke 11:2; "Father" is red, the rest is pink; cf. Matt 6:9-10).

This saying is recognizable, even in the SV translation, as the opening address and first two petitions of "the Lord's Prayer": "Father, sanctified

⁶⁶ There is a possible association of the "kingdom of God" and power over "the demons of death" in a recently published fragment from Qumran, 4Q525. Lines 3-4 have [mlk]wt / 'lwhym, and line 5 has resh[p]y] mwt. For discussion of this fragment see Evans, *Jesus and His Contemporaries* (cit. n. 44) 147-148.

(or hallowed, ἁγιασθήτω) be your name, your kingdom come (ἐλθέτω).” The second petition is, in fact, a prayer for the “coming” of God’s future (eschatological!) kingdom.

In their commentary (325-327; cf. 148-149) no notice is taken of an ancient Jewish prayer that is certainly reflected in Jesus’ own reformulation, the *Qaddish*. This prayer, composed in vernacular Aramaic, was originally associated with the study of Torah as a dismissal prayer, but is now used mainly in connection with mourning for the dead. One of its ancient forms goes like this:

Magnified and sanctified be His great name in the world which He hath created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom during your life and during your days, and during the life of all the house of Israel, ever speedily and at a near time, and say ye, Amen.⁶⁷

This prayer, like that of Jesus, breathes the spirit of the ancient Jewish apocalyptic worldview.

b. Truncated Parables. One of the characteristic modes of Jesus’ teaching and preaching was his use of parables. Many of Jesus’ recorded parables are accepted as genuine by the Seminar, but in some cases only with the application of scissors and paste. The parable of the “Lost Sheep” (Luke 15:4-7) is colored pink, but only up to v. 6, which concludes with “Celebrate with me, because I have found my lost sheep.” The point of the parable is painted black:

I’m telling you that it’ll be just like this in heaven; there’ll be more celebrating over one sinner who has a change of heart than over

⁶⁷ Abraham E. Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971) 154. The prayer as used in contemporary Judaism is found in the *Siddur*, the Jewish Prayerbook. See e.g. Rabbi Nosson Scherman (ed., trans.), *The Complete Art Scroll Siddur* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984) 800-801. I express my thanks for my copy to my doctoral student, Rabbi Harry Manhoff, who presented it to me as a gift.

ninety-nine virtuous people who have no need to change their hearts (355).

The parable of the "shrewd manager" (Luke 16:1-8) is colored red up to the first part of v. 8: "The master praised the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." The point of the parable is colored black: "for the children of this world [or this age] exhibit better sense in dealing with their own kind than do the children of light." This is like telling a joke and leaving out the "punch line"! The scholars do not like this parable's "punch line" because it "moralizes" the story (359).

The scholars have other devices to use in interpreting Jesus' parables that are more inventive than simply cutting. The parable of "the Sower" (Mark 4:3-8 // Matt 13:3-8 // Luke 8:5-8a // *Thomas* 9, all pink) is one of the parables in which agricultural imagery occurs, here with special reference to the harvest (an eschatological metaphor!), and concludes with reference to a bountiful yield for the seed that fell on good soil. The Seminar refers to *Thomas*' version as the most original (and I am inclined to agree) but offers no interpretation except to situate it in the context of "hellenistic rhetoric" (478). No notice is taken of the supernatural yield referred to (30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold in Mark and Matt, 100-fold in Luke, 60-fold and 120-fold in *Thomas*).⁶⁸

Another parable employing agricultural imagery is the one on the "Mustard Seed" (Mark 4:30-32 // Matt 13:31-32 // Luke 13:18-19 // *Thomas* 20; red in *Thomas*, otherwise pink), in which Jesus compares the growth of the kingdom to that of a small mustard seed which "produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky" (*Thomas* 20:3). Our scholars view this one as "a parody of the mighty cedar of Lebanon [Ezekiel 17:22-23] and the apocalyptic tree of Daniel [4:12, 20-22]" (194). This parable is said to betray "an underlying sense of humor on Jesus'

⁶⁸ A 5-fold yield was common in first-century Palestine, as recently demonstrated by Robert K. Mclver, "One Hundred-Fold Yield—Miraculous or Mundane? Matthew 13.8, 23; Mark 4.8, 20; Luke 8.8," *NTS* 40 (1994) 606-608.

part. It is also anti-social in that it endorses counter movements and ridicules established tradition" (485). No further comment is required here.

The two singly attested sayings in *Thomas* regarded as genuine by the Seminar are both parables. *Thomas* 97 compares the kingdom to a woman carrying a jar of meal home without noticing that it was broken at the handle and all of the meal was spilling out. This parable, which can be compared to that of the wise and foolish maidens in Matthew 25:1-12 (gray), is taken by the scholars as "a parody of the story of Elijah and the widow" (524; cf. 1 Kings 17:8-16). *Thomas* 98, which compares the kingdom to a would-be assassin who tests his sword before using it, has to do with "reversal," in the view of the Seminar: "the little guy bests the big guy by taking the precautions a prudent person would take before encountering the village bully" (525). The parable can more plausibly be viewed alongside such other parables as the "Tower Builder" (Luke 14:28-30, black) or the "Warring King" (Luke 14:31-32, also black), and viewed as a provocative example of the necessity of preparation in anticipation of the kingdom. But once the eschatology is removed, such parables are reduced to pure nonsense.

c. Contextless Aphorisms. A well known saying of Jesus attested no fewer than six times (Mark 8:35 [black]; Matt 10:39 [gray]; 16:25 [gray]; Luke 9:24 [gray]; 17:33 [pink]; John 12:25 [gray]) is the one on "saving" or "losing" one's life. The Jesus Seminar colors pink the version found in Luke 17:33: "Whoever tries to hang on to life will forfeit it, but whoever forfeits life will preserve it." In Luke 17 it is found in a context, preceding and following the saying, in which Jesus is warning of fearful events attendant upon the coming of the days of the Son of Man (Luke 17:22-37). This context is, of course, colored black and gray. The pink-colored saying is taken as a "paradoxical" saying supplied by the evangelist with a secondary context. The saying by itself is said to be "a contextless aphorism" (367). But the eschatology in this saying, in and of itself,

cannot be removed simply by jerking it out of the context in which it appears. It speaks of a *future*, preparation for which may necessitate the giving up of one's own life!

Indeed, the juxtaposition of the present situation with that of the future is a characteristic feature of Jesus' teaching, and is part of the chronological dualism of his Jewish apocalyptic worldview ("this age" / "the age to come"). It pervades the supposedly "non-eschatological" sayings material assigned by the Seminar to Jesus.

Another example of the same thing is also frequently attested: "Many of the first will be last, and of the last many will be first," as mistranslated in the SV of Mark 10:31 (better the RSV: "many that are first will be last, and the last first"). As found in Mark (and Matt 19:30; the first half in *Thomas* 4:2) the saying is colored gray (also the different form in Luke 13:30). Only in the version in Matthew 20:16 is it colored pink: "The last will be first, and the first last." The other versions are said to be "softened" (224) or "qualified" by the addition of "many" (473). Had our scholars paid attention to the underlying Semitic idiom, they would have seen that the version with "many" is likely to be more original. The meaning is really "(All) those who are first, who are many . . .," as in Daniel 12:2, where "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake" means "all those, who are many" ⁶⁹ Be that as it may, the meaning of the saying is the point at issue. The saying is rightly taken as "a memorable reversal," the basis for which, however, is not understood by the scholars.

⁶⁹ This lack of attention to Semitic philology is surprising. A striking example occurs in the scholars' interpretation of Jesus' cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" in Mark 15:34 (black), which they take simply as a quotation of Psalm 22:1 secondarily attributed to Jesus by the evangelist (125-126). They pay no attention to the fact that the transliterated words in Mark's Greek text (*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*) are Aramaic, not Hebrew, and that this fact may have a bearing on how the saying should be understood.

We have seen that the Seminar has Jesus "congratulating" the poor (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20; *Thomas* 54, red in *Thomas*, others pink). Their comment is interesting:

Congratulating the poor without qualification is unexpected to say the least, and even paradoxical, since congratulations were normally extended to those who enjoyed prosperity, happiness, or power. The congratulations addressed to the weeping and the hungry are expressed in vivid and exaggerated language, which announces a dramatic transformation (138).

What the scholars mean by "dramatic transformation" is clarified in their comment to *Thomas* 54 ("Congratulations to the poor, for to you belongs Heaven's domain").⁷⁰

He announced that God's domain belonged to the poor, not because they were righteous, but because they were poor. This reverses a common view that God blesses the righteous with riches and curses the immoral with poverty (504).

And what consolation might the poor and the hungry derive from this? What Jesus does announce, in fact, is the dramatic reversal that he expects in the future, in the coming kingdom of God:

Congratulations, you poor! God's domain belongs to you.
 Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.
 Congratulations, you who weep now! You will laugh (Luke 6:20, rightly colored red).⁷¹

Many more examples could be cited of the Seminar's failure to notice the eschatology in their data base, but this discussion has gone on long enough. I cannot refrain, however, from citing one more instance, another saying colored pink by the scholars:

⁷⁰ "The poor" is a mistranslation of the Coptic. There is no vocative case as such in Coptic; the definite article is used instead (as in Hebrew). In that case the context determines the translation, and here "you poor" is correct (as in Luke 6:20).

⁷¹ The corresponding woes ("damn you") on the rich, well-fed, and laughing in 6:24-25 are colored black by the Seminar.

There are castrated men who were born that way, and there are castrated men who were castrated by others, and there are castrated men who castrate themselves because of Heaven's imperial rule (Matt 19:12).

This saying about "eunuchs" calls to mind others in which Jesus counsels ripping out an offending eye, or cutting off an offending right hand, to prevent having one's whole body wind up in hell (Matt 5:29-30 // Mark 9:43-47 // Matt 18:8-9, gray). The context in Matthew 19 is a discussion of Jesus' prohibition of divorce (19:9 [black]; cf. 5:31-32 [black]; Mark 10:11-12 [gray]; Luke 16:18 [gray]), and comes as a reply to the disciples' wondering if in view of this prohibition it were better not to marry at all (19:20). Jesus' colorful saying has to do with voluntary celibacy, which a man might elect for the sake of the coming kingdom, i.e. in anticipation of the resurrection life in which "people do not marry" (Matt 22:30, gray). Jesus' provision for becoming "a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom" cannot be understood apart from the eschatological worldview that informs it.

So why do our scholars color this saying pink? In their view the saying is "an attack on a male-dominated patriarchal society in which male virility and parenthood were the exclusive norms." Jesus is also here "undermining the depreciation of yet another marginal group, this time the eunuchs" (226)! At the hands of these interpreters Jesus becomes, in effect, the prophet of late 20th-century "p.c."

As to the possibility that the saying might be about celibacy, this is entertained only to be rejected:

The Fellows of the Seminar were overwhelmingly of the opinion that Jesus did not advocate celibacy. A majority of the Fellows doubted, in fact, that Jesus himself was celibate. They regard it as probable that he had a special relationship with at least one woman, Mary of Magdala. In any case, the sayings on castration should not be taken as Jesus' authorization for an ascetic lifestyle; his behavior suggests that he celebrated life by eating, drinking, and fraternizing freely with both women and men (220-221).

The question posed earlier bears repeating: Who would want to crucify a fellow like this? Or why? Or was Jesus really crucified after all? Those who have nothing better to do can "stay tuned" to a future's phase of the Seminar's work for the scholars' answers to these questions.

7. Concluding Observations

The Jesus of the Jesus Seminar is a non-Jewish Jesus. To put it metaphorically, the Seminar has performed a forcible epispasm on the historical Jesus, a surgical procedure removing the marks of his circumcision. The result might arouse some disquiet in the minds of people who know the history of the 30's and 40's of our century. But the Jesus of the Jesus Seminar is much too banal to cause us to think that the ideology producing him is like that which produced the "Aryan Jesus" of the 1930's.⁷²

Scholars of religion have rightly come to be suspicious of theologically driven scholarship. We should be equally suspicious of atheologically driven scholarship, or *any* ideologically driven scholarship, political or otherwise. The "hidden agenda" in the work of the Jesus Seminar is clearly an ideology that drives it. So what is this ideology? An important clue is found in the frequency with which the word "secular" appears in *The Five Gospels*. For example: Jesus was not interested in "fine points of the Law"; his responses to his contemporaries "were more secular than legal in character" (201). When Jesus illustrates a point with reference to the intrusion by a burglar into a homeowner's dwelling (Luke 12:39, colored gray), this root metaphor "would have been understood on his

⁷² Probably the most notorious example is Walter Grundmann, *Jesus der Galiläer und das Judentum*, in the series "Veröffentlichungen des Instituts zur Erforschung des Jüdischen Einflusses auf das Deutsche Kirchliche Leben" (Leipzig: Wigand, 1940). Grundmann argues that Galilee was predominantly gentile, and Jesus' ancestry was Aryan; Jesus drew on his ancestral Aryan traditions for his anti-Jewish message. Grundmann's career as a churchman and prominent New Testament scholar lasted into the 1970's. For a useful discussion see Marshall Johnson, *JES* 23 (1986) 1-24, esp. 4-12.

lips in a secular sense" (342). Jesus was, simply, "a secular sage" (287). This obvious anachronism requires explanation, and we find it in the celebration by the Jesus Seminar of the removal of the quest of the historical Jesus from "the church, seminaries, and isolated theological enclaves" (4) to more secular institutional settings. The ideology driving the Jesus Seminar is, I would argue, one of "secularization." Of course, one should expect that, in secular academic settings (such as a state university in the U.S.), a non-theological approach to historical evidence, including religious evidence, is standard. In my view, it ought to be the starting point even for theological historical research. This is *not* what we have in the case of the Jesus Seminar. What we have, instead, is an approach driven by an ideology of secularization, and a process of coloring the historical evidence to fit a secular ideal. Thus, in robbing Jesus of his Jewishness, the Jesus Seminar has finally robbed him of his *religion*.

"Seek-you'll find." This is one of the "authentic" sayings of Jesus (Matthew 7:7 // Luke 11:9 // *Thomas* 92:1, colored pink) in *The Five Gospels*. A group of secularized theologians and secular academics went seeking a secular Jesus, and they found him! They think they found him, but, in fact, they created him. Jesus the "party animal," whose zany wit and caustic humor would enliven an otherwise dull cocktail party—this is the product of the Jesus Seminar's six years' research. In a sense the Jesus Seminar, with its ideology of secularization, represents a "shadow image" of the old "New Quest," with its neo-orthodox theology—and its ultimate bankruptcy.

Afterword

James M. Robinson

Birger Pearson's essay, "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar," presented in this **Occasional Paper**, offers a quite critical appraisal of the main outcome of the Jesus Seminar thus far. Most criticism that one reads and hears is from the non-scholarly community and from the scholars who represent the right-wing fringe,^{*} which is hence not too relevant for main-line scholarship. But this essay is from a main-line New Testament scholar of distinction, indeed a product of Harvard's outstanding New Testament program and a Project Director of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity. Hence his is a much more serious challenge to the Jesus Seminar. I have agreed to Pearson's suggestion that I write a brief **Afterword**, in part to explain my continued membership in the Jesus Seminar, and in part to indicate my own assessment of Jesus.

The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar was first conceived in discussions in which I took part at the Society of Biblical Literature almost twenty years ago. It grew out of the concern such New Testament scholars as John Dominic Crossan and I shared with Robert Funk, to the effect that the valuable results of critical biblical scholarship were not being communicated to the educated lay public by their pastors or even by the academic community. We felt that we should take responsibility for meeting this need.

A first meeting of the Jesus Seminar was planned to take place in Denver some fifteen years ago, but had to be deferred indefinitely, since just at that time Funk was dismissed from his position as Director of Scholars Press. I was President of the Society of Biblical Literature at the time, and felt morally obligated to oppose the inhumane way in which this termination was carried out: At a Board meeting of Scholars Press, his dismissal was decided upon behind his back. During a lunch break when he was out of his office, a locksmith was brought in to change the lock on his office door. (I later went to Scholars Press in Chico CA and recuperated for him his most valuable possessions from his office to which he no longer had access.) His salary at Scholars Press was terminated half-way through a year's unpaid leave of absence from his professorial position at the University of Montana. (I finally persuaded the SBL to provide the other half of his year's salary.) His medical insurance was discontinued just months after open heart surgery. (I provided at the Institute a

^{*} Represented by Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1995).

secretarial position for his wife, to make funding for such basic needs possible.) Malicious rumors of his absconding with funds were stopped when no evidence was forthcoming from an analysis of the records. (I published an exoneration, so that he would have a reasonable chance to obtain employment.") David Packard Sr., on hearing such details from his son, a friend of Funk's who had visited Scholars Press to investigate the termination for himself, commented that in the secular business world no CEO would be dismissed in such an immoral way! Yet we are supposed to be experts in the Judaeo-Christian ethical religion!

Whereas colleagues had been eager to become involved in the publishing activities that Funk had for a decade been engendering, some now wondered if it would be safer to distance themselves. When asked for advice, I urged such persons not to withdraw from their commitments. As for myself, I had made a basic decision not to participate in the disgraceful procedure to which Funk was subjected. Hence I have quite personal reasons for continuing my involvement in his undertaking, irrespective of the extent to which I agree with specifics of the Jesus Seminar (and in spite of the fact that I play there a quite sporadic and peripheral role with no leadership function). Funk is the most brilliant, the most creative, though, understandably, the most alienated American New Testament scholar of our time.

I regret that the Jesus Seminar has evolved over the years into a somewhat drastic, sensationalistic posture, in which regard I agree with much of Pearson's analysis. Indeed I have felt obliged to distance myself explicitly from some such matters." I fear that Polebridge Press has been controlled by financial necessities that have at times outweighed sober judgment. Headlines had to be sought! This sometimes meant: At any price! At times persons of more radical views than those of Funk himself used the Jesus Seminar as their uncritical (!) platform: Jesus was not the kind of Jew to use the Lord's Prayer; rather he was a Cynic, indeed a sot. Such views are not actually representative of the main stream of critical New Testament scholarship today, and to this extent the Jesus Seminar is not fulfilling its original purpose, which has in effect been turned over to Hershel Shanks' *Biblical Archaeological Review* and *Bible Review*.

" "Statement Regarding Robert Funk," The Council for the Study of Religion *Bulletin* 12 (December 1981) 143.

*** "The History-of-Religions Taxonomy of Q: The Cynic Hypothesis," *Gnosisforschung und Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Kurt Rudolph zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Holger Preißler and Hubert Seiwert (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1994 [1995]) 247-265. Two further essays are yet to appear in *Festschriften*: "Building Blocks in the Social History of Q" and "Galilean Upstarts: A Sot's Cynical Disciples?"

What concerns me most about the Jesus Seminar is that it tends to make Jesus into a queer duck rather than a serious person worthy of a hearing. (Actually, it was Albert Schweitzer's deluded and mistaken apocalypticist that was queer, though those with the still-prevalent eschatological orientation for Jesus do not face up to this fact.) Rudolf Bultmann argued that the problem with the mythological language of the kerygma was that it was so offensive to enlightened sensibilities that educated people were turned off before they really heard the existential meaning the mythology conveyed, and hence never came to an existential decision regarding the Christian message. In a similar way the Jesus Seminar has not communicated to intelligent people a Jesus worthy of consideration, but often only conveyed the offensiveness of uncritically negative biblical scholarship. Rather than serving to mediate main-line biblical scholarship to the educated public, the Jesus Seminar has for many become just one more reason to reject "higher criticism."

What Jesus Had to Say

What we need to face up to is an undomesticated Jesus, who was what one might call a real idealist, a committed radical, in any case a profound person who had come up with a solution to the human dilemma:

What Jesus had to say centered around the ideal of God's rule ("the kingdom of God"), the main "theological" category Jesus engendered. Calling the ideal *God's rule* puts it in an antithetical relation both to other political and social systems, and to individual self-interest. The ravens and wild flowers prosper without working to secure their needs. God cares about every sparrow sold a dime a dozen. For God will not give a stone when asked for bread, or a snake when asked for fish, but can be counted on to give what one really needs. Indeed people should trust God to know what they need even before they ask. This "utopian" vision was the core of what Jesus had to say. It was both good news, reassurance that the good would happen to undo one's plight in actual experience, and the call upon people to do that good in actual practice.

The human dilemma is in large part that we are each other's fate, the tool of evil that ruins the other person, as we look out for number one, having wised up with regard to any youthful idealism we might once have cherished. But if I would basically cease and desist from pushing you down to keep myself up, and you for your part would do the same, then the vicious circle would be broken. Society would become mutually supportive, rather than self-destructive. Count on God to look out for you, to provide people that will care for you, and listen to him when he calls on you to provide for them. This radical trust in and responsiveness to God is what would make society function (as God's society). This is

what, for Jesus, faith and discipleship were all about. Nothing else has a right to claim any functional relationship to him.

Put in language derived from his sayings: I am hungry because you hoard food. You are cold because I hoard clothing. So we are all to get rid of our backpacks and wallets! Such "security" is to be replaced by "God's rule," which means both what we trust God to do (to tell the other person to share food with me), and what we hear God telling us to do (to share clothing with the other person). One does not carry money while bypassing the poor (literally: "the beggars"), or a backpack full of extra clothes and food, while the cold and hungry lie in the gutter ignored. This is why the beggars, the hungry, the depressed, are fortunate: God, that is to say, those who hearken to God, those in whom God rules, will care for them. They are called upon to trust in God's rule as there for them ("Theirs is the kingdom of God"). One does not even carry a club for self-protection, but rather returns good for evil even with regard to one's enemies. One turns the other cheek. God is the kind of person who provides sunshine and rain even to those who oppose him. So it is those who care for ("love") even their enemies who are God's children.

In the original form of the Lord's Prayer, what followed directly upon "Thy kingdom come," as its concrete meaning, was: "Give us this day our daily bread." People should ask for no more than a day's ration of food, trusting God to provide for today, and then tomorrow trusting for tomorrow. God's rule ("the kingdom of God") was interpreted by Matthew's community to mean: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This petition added to the Lord's Prayer is, technically speaking, not a call for action, but, like "Thy kingdom come" which it interprets, an appeal to God. When one prays, one trusts in God to answer. But God answers through motivating people: to turn the other cheek; to give the shirt off one's back; to lend, expecting nothing in return. The person who prays to God for help is the same person whom God motivates to help: "Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors!*"

Part of God ruling is helping the disabled with whatever the primitive psycho-somatic medicine of the day could provide. One went from door to door, and, if admitted for bed and breakfast (the answer to the prayer for a day's bread), one placed God's Shalom on the house, which meant one healed the infirm there as best one could, as God ruling ("Heal the sick and say: The kingdom of God has drawn near"). Just as the sharing of food and clothing, the canceling of debts, the non-retaliation against enemies, were not seen as human virtues, but rather as God acting through those who trust him, just so healings were not attributed to some witch-doctor's or magician's individual technique or skill, but to God's finger that made use not only of Jesus' fingers, but of the hands of others as well. Clearly all

this that one could not oneself do, from renunciation of self-interest to healing disease, took place because God was doing it, God was ruling in this unusual human society--this was in fact the "coming" of "the kingdom of God"! For Jesus was a "faith healer" in the sense that he trusted God to interject his "finger" into the human dilemma (the "coming" of "God's rule"), to overcome the plight of the handicapped.

But not everything had been done: Not all people lived such trust in God, not all the helpless had been helped, not all the disabled were healed. Of course one trusted God to follow through to completion ("eschatology"). But Jesus' message was not to distract from grim reality by means of the utopian ideal of "pie in the sky by-and-by," but rather to focus attention on trusting God for today's ration of life, and on hearing God's call to give life now to one's neighbor. In this sense he moved beyond John's "apocalypticism."

All this is as far from "the Christian coalition" and even main-line Christianity as it was from the Judaism practiced in Jesus' day. The "hardest" saying of Jesus is: "Why do you call me Lord Lord, but do not do what I say?" One laments the absence of a "high christology" in the sayings of Jesus. But what could be "higher" than maintaining that doing Jesus' word is what acquits in the day of judgment? Christological creeds may be no more than pious dodges to avoid this unavoidable condition of discipleship: Actually do what he said to do! People do not do what he said, not simply because of the shift in cultural conditions, for which an adequate hermeneutic might provide a solution, but ultimately because people do not trust God as he did (though of course one claims to have Christian "faith," that is to say, a traditional ideology). This, not the Jesus Seminar's shocking negations, is what should be unsettling about finding out what Jesus had to say.

All this of course sounds incredibly naive. Once Jesus launched himself into this lifestyle, practicing what he preached, he did not last long. A reality check is called for! Yet the bottom line is not necessarily so cynical: In concentration camps, cells of a few who can really trust each other, due to a shared ethnic, religious, or political commitment, and who are hence willing to give an extra portion of their meager food and other necessities of life to the feeblest, have turned out to have a higher chance of survival than do individuals looking out only for number one. Selfishness may ultimately turn out to be a luxury we can ill afford. There is a paradoxical saying to the effect that when one saves one's life one loses it, but when one loses it one saves it. To be sure, this has in view less longevity than integrity. It is all the more worthy of serious consideration.